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Globalization and Fashion: Too Fast, Too Furious

Victoria Ledezma

I. Introduction

Never before have consumers had access to so many fashion trends at such exceedingly low prices. Having all of these options has almost become second nature, with vast malls being filled constantly with various new fast fashion stores. Well, this trend is not mere coincidence: it is part of globalization's influence on the fashion industry. But what is globalization? Simply put, globalization is the economic and social process whereby global markets and cultures increasingly dominate local markets and cultures. Globalization has played a huge role in the fashion industry; in fact, the rapid change in this industry is arguably among the most significant effects of globalization. As a result of globalization, the fashion industry has opened up to a variety of new styles, influences, and methods of production. Consequently, fashion trends have become more readily available to consumers all over the world. Globalization has thus changed both the way fashion trends are transmitted and the way the clothes are produced. However, the relationship between fashion and globalization is a complex and multi-dimensional phenomenon that consists of many parts, not all of which are positive. This paper examines the changes in the fashion industry due to the evolution of fast fashion as a result of globalization. Using a global assembly line, fast fashion has increased production speed to match the rapid appearance of new trends while simultaneously lowering prices. As a result, customers purchase more and more products, enabling the fast-fashion industry to grow even larger. While this might translate into short-term savings for consumers, the long-term damage to the fashion industry could be catastrophic.

II. A Brief History of Fashion

i. From Haute Couture to Fast Fashion

Before globalization, fashion production was transmitted vertically from the upper classes down to the lower classes. Fashion was valued for its craftsmanship as well as its quality, and many high-quality pieces came with a large price tag. At the centre of the fashion industry were fashion houses. Fashion houses were companies that specialized in the design of high-fashion clothing and accessories. The designer Charles Frederick Worth originated the concept of the fashion house in early 19th-century Paris. These early fashion houses designed for rich and powerful members of the upper class; later on, those in the lower classes would copy those designs. The clothes produced by the fashion houses were expensive because they were made of the highest-quality materials and were sewn together by the expert sewers. Typically, each piece was custom made to perfectly fit each client, so there was a lengthy process from the initial order to the moment the customer received the product. This type of fashion was referred to as “haute couture.” Fashion houses had small design teams that created two clothing collections per year (one for spring/summer and one for fall/winter) that were shown at fashion shows in affluent cities such as New York, Paris, and London (English 5-9). These collections were shown one season ahead to clients, and then clients were able to place an order based on what they liked and wanted to wear for the upcoming season.

Throughout the 20th century, this dynamic started to change in Western countries. As classes began to mix, so too did fashion. In addition, the role of women in society began to change within the Western world. Fashion houses adapted to this shift and created what is now known as ready-to-wear lines. Similar to haute couture, ready-to-wear collections were presented twice a year to consumers. However, this clothing was sold in finished condition, standardized sizes, and mass quantities. They were still made with the highest quality materials and were still very expensive, but not as much as their haute couture counterparts. In the early 1900s, fashion and trendy clothes began to appeal to more than just the upper class. More and more stores opened that sold ready-to-wear clothes catered to the lower classes (Tokatli 23–26). This trend increased rapidly throughout the 20th century, especially in the 1980s during the rise of globalization. During this period, consumers were introduced to transnational corporations, cyber technology, and electronic mass media. These forces have profoundly changed the way fashion is produced, marketed, sold, bought, worn, and thrown away. Globalization has thus opened a new clothing market with a massive demand for fashionable and trendy clothes, a demand that traditional fashion collections and stores were unable to keep up

with. People wanted trendier clothes at lower prices; thus, fast fashion was born (Bhardwaj and Fairhurst 167–168).

The biggest outcome of the globalization of the fashion industry has been fast fashion, which is the process of moving designs quickly from the catwalk to retailers. Fast fashion places its emphasis on inexpensive manufacturing, allowing retailers to sell current fashion trends at low prices and as quickly as possible. As such, almost anyone can afford to wear the latest trends, and the consumer is provided with new trends on an almost weekly basis (Barnes and Lea-Greenwood). Due to its trendy and affordable nature, fast fashion causes trends to flow both from top to bottom and from bottom to top, which is very different than in the height of haute couture. By providing consumers with a more affordable alternative to traditional haute couture, fast fashion allowed the fashion industry to cope with the rapid changes and demands of the market.

ii. Born in the USA: Fast Fashion in America

Fast fashion in the United States started in the 1980s, beginning as an offshoot of the “quick response” manufacturing techniques that emerged around that time. The rapid spread of fast fashion in the country started when Zara, which pioneered the fast-fashion model, opened its first US store in 1989. That same year, the popular fast-fashion chain Forever 21 also opened its first retail store in US Stores like H&M have been around for much longer but have adapted to fit the growing market for fast fashion, which expanded throughout the 1990s (Tokatli 27–29). Today, the US is the world’s largest apparel market. Consequently, the influence of American consumers and consumer culture has contributed to the popularity of fast fashion. The US economy and population creates the perfect landscape for fast-fashion stores to thrive, and as a result, many fast fashion retailers originated or have large headquarters in the United States. Specifically, the US has a large middle class with disposable income and an interest in shopping and is also home to many of the world’s largest advertising firms (United States, Congress, Joint Economic Committee). The internationally known fashion magazine *Vogue* launched its first issue in the US and has since expanded to produce other versions in many different countries. Even so, American *Vogue* is still seen by many as the most influential and important version, and although countless countries and cities now have their own fashion week, New York fashion week remains the most influential. Additionally, European fast-fashion stores like Zara and H&M have gained global success after being wildly successful in the American market. Beginning largely with its success in the US, fast fashion has come to dominate virtually all Western fashion markets, bringing with it the effects of globalization.

III. Globalization and Fast Fashion

The consumers in dominant Western countries benefit the most from globalization. Globalization provides them with an abundance of different fashion trends sold by massive retailers with the resources to provide a constant supply of products available online. In fact, shopping has become something of a recreational hobby for some Western consumers. Shopping for new clothes can be a fun, absorbing, and even compulsive activity. This culture surrounding clothes in the West is very different from that in other parts of the world. Western consumers shop for pleasure, for entertainment, and for their need to consume. In 2007, a research team from MIT, Stanford, and Carnegie Mellon conducted a study studying using fMRI technology to examine how the brain reacts when Western customers shop for clothing. They discovered that the brain shows greatly increased activity when we shop (Knutson, Rick, Wimmer, Prelec, and Loewenstein 149). The researchers concluded that consumers gain direct pleasure from shopping but they gain an even greater pleasure from receiving a bargain. With fast fashion, all clothing items are seen as a bargain, with \$5 shirts, \$10 pants, and \$15 sweaters being much cheaper than the items outside the fast fashion industry. For the globalized consumer, seeing a desirable piece of fashionable clothing combined with a low price elicits a natural response to shop and thereby produce pleasure (Knutson, Rick, Wimmer, Prelec, and Loewenstein 149). That is how fast-fashion retailers like Zara and Forever 21 work; they tap into the consumer's desire to have a variety of the latest trends at low cost. Online shopping has also made it easier to consume fast fashion, with deals—and the temporary pleasure they provide—being only a click away. Western consumers are hooked on fast fashion, and the retailers know it. Fast fashion is no longer about the art of fashion; it is about the market of fashion.

The goal of fast fashion is the optimization of the supply chain. Globalization in particular has provided the low-cost labour and international markets necessary for the creation of a global assembly line, which allows for cheaper and faster production of clothing. Additionally, in fast fashion, manufacturers do not market their own clothing. Instead, large retailers purchase their clothing from a number of manufacturers located all around the world (Lago, Martinez-de-Albeniz, Moscoso, and Vall 57). Zara is a prime example of the globalization of fashion and the use of a global assembly line. Zara has about 300 in-house designers and uses input from store managers from around the world. Using information technology (IT), store managers track what is selling and what is not selling and relay that information to the corporate headquarters. In addition, store managers give live updates on what products customers want but cannot find in the stores. Consequently, the in-house

designers have immediate access to detailed statistics, which enables them to create the next wave of designs quickly. Once the design is made, it is outsourced to a factory where vast quantities of materials and a ready supply of labour are easily available. This process results in fast, fresh fashion designs being made available to consumers on a regular basis. New Zara products are typically designed, manufactured, and sent to the stores within two weeks (Mihm 57–59). Other popular global fast fashion retailers like H&M and Forever 21 also lead the way in selling a wide variety of trendy, low-priced clothes on a global scale. Importing clothes to many locations is also easier than ever before, further enhancing the reach of fast fashion. Ultimately, these fast-fashion innovations allow “market-driven brands such as H&M [to] have up to 100 designers scan world trends for inspiration, and to ensure their collections will reach a global audience” (Ichikawa 254), which means that these retailers can produce clothes marketed to a wide range of people, not just to a local or elite group.

IV. The Dangers of Fast Fashion

i. Challenges to Fashion Houses and the Ethics of Fast Fashion

Right now, the future of the fashion industry sits on a slippery slope with the momentum in fast fashion’s favour. The industry has reached its breaking point, and all of its members must learn to adapt to the changes fast fashion has created. Many traditional fashion houses and local designers cannot keep up with the fast-fashion giants and their trendy, low-cost clothing. Haute couture has taken a back seat in terms of popularity to the trendsetting fast-fashion retailers. Fashion houses still present haute couture collections, but they largely serve as marketing tools to strengthen their identities through social media, fashion news media, and magazines. Many haute couture and high-fashion retailers are adapting their businesses to follow the model of fast-fashion retailers. Fashion houses have tried to compete by creating more collections each year. However, this trend has resulted in designers feeling overworked from trying to create six or more collections per year that are unique but fit the brand’s image. Luxury brands and fashion houses simply cannot match the huge design teams employed by fast-fashion retailers (Conlon). In order to keep up with fast fashion, fashion houses are strategically moving production to factories with lower wages, but this compromises the integrity and image of the company. One example of this compromise occurred when Lululemon moved its production to China, resulting in a low-quality pant that many customers complained about (Huff). Another strategy fashion houses have resorted to is collaborating with fast-fashion retailers. For example, H&M partners once a year with a luxury fashion house to

produce a collection, allowing for a mix of fast fashion and luxury. Other fashion houses have created specialty lines, such as the Simply Vera by Vera Wang collection for Kohls, that are tailored to customers who typically shop at fast-fashion retailers (Mihm 59). Although these sorts of lines are produced by traditional fashion houses, they lack the artisanal design process that defined fashion a generation ago. Such artisanal practices are simply not valued by most consumers in the modern fashion landscape. Fashion used to be an art, but the prevalence of consumerism has reduced it to a bunch of poorly made, cheap clothes.

In addition to a decrease in quality, the production methods of fast fashion come with a higher ethical price than their predecessors. The whole premise of fast fashion is that there are new styles in stores every week, but how can this be done while remaining cost effective? One solution is to use pre-made designs and cheap, hazardous materials, and to employ workers in underdeveloped nations (Ross). From environmental waste and intellectual-property concerns to outsourcing and slave labour, the production of fast fashion is destructive. First, most of the clothes and accessories in stores are a direct imitation or a copy of runway designs from around the world. Forever 21 and H&M have been described as prime examples of retailers using the major designers' works and changing only slight details (Martinez). The goal is to sell very cheap and accurate replicas of luxury brands, and some companies have gone so far as to copy other fast-fashion retailers to sell products at an even lower price.

Since very little thought goes into designing clothes for fast fashion, companies can send new designs to the factory on an almost daily basis and have new clothes available in stores every week. Shockingly, this practice is not illegal, because fashion designs themselves are not copyrightable, only elements like logos and certain prints. Fast-fashion retailers copy the non-proprietary elements of a design, which is more than enough to sell to the willing mobs of consumers. Popular retailer Forever 21 has been sued and has settled over fifty claims for stealing prints and designs from designers such as Anna Sui, 3.1 Phillip Lim, and Diane Von Furstenberg (Martinez). The company has come to realize that it can gain more from the production and sale of copied designs than it loses in court. Therefore, it is actually a more profitable strategy for fast-fashion companies to infringe on copyrights and settle the suits later than it is for them to license a design in the first place (Martinez).

Copying designs is not the only way fast-fashion retailers manufacture their clothing faster. To make these clothes in less time, companies need a lot of labour, and to keep costs down, fast-fashion retailers depend on cheap labour in underdeveloped countries. In the modern fashion industry, clothing is still being made predominantly by people; although industrial clothing machines exist, they represent a substantial

investment for factories. So why would companies invest in expensive machines when they can hire low-wage workers instead? Sweatshops are not uncommon in the fashion industry; they have been around for decades, but with the increased demand brought on by fast fashion, sweatshops have grown in size and increased in number. Due in part to globalization, manufacturing can now be outsourced more easily to these terrible sweatshops in countries where wages can be just a few dollars per day (Ross). Fast-fashion retailers source their goods to low-wage sweatshops in countries like Mexico, China, Thailand, and Vietnam. Manufacturers can subcontract to sweatshops in developed countries through the vast underground economies of immigrant communities in cities such as Los Angeles, New York, and London. All of these factories are completely unsafe; the workers are subjected to harmful chemicals, poor working conditions, and abuse from managers. None of them are paid a suitable living wage, so employers can trap workers into continuing to work long hours at the factory in an attempt to earn enough to survive. Many of the workers, the majority of whom are young women, are lied to and exploited on a daily basis in order to keep the fast fashion industry going (Ross). Unfortunately, because the sweatshops are independent contractors, fast-fashion retailers bear no legal responsibility for the working conditions. Outsourcing to contractors keeps fast-fashion retailers' costs down and avoids any directed repercussions.

ii. The Environmental Impact of Fast Fashion

Besides low-cost labour, fast-fashion retailers must also depend on cheap materials to fabricate their clothes. This model of fast-fashion production using cheap materials is especially problematic because it is environmentally unsustainable in a number of ways. First, textile production causes a lot of environmental harm to the ecosystem, especially through carbon dioxide emissions, which are a leading cause of atmospheric pollution. These emissions are created primarily as a byproduct of global transportation and the utilization of heavy factory waste, both of which are essential to the cheap manufacturing employed by fast fashion. Another environmentally damaging practice is the releasing of harmful chemicals and dyes into the aquatic environment throughout the cheap production process. The growing demand for fast fashion continues to increase the waste produced from the textile factories, both in dyes and caustic solutions. All of these factors have seriously damaged the environment over the years, and fast fashion is the root cause (Claudio 449).

Adding to the environmental impact of fast fashion, the clothing made from these factories is simply not made to last and works on a wear-once basis. Fast-fashion retailers are concerned only with the bottom line, and because there is only a

small markup on the clothes, in order to earn a profit, retailers must sell an enormous amount of clothing each year. The fast fashion business model is dependent on the consumer's desire to buy new clothing for every occasion. Many of these clothes are made cheaply and haphazardly, causing them to fall apart after one use, which results in the consumers buying more and more clothes. Consumers are taught to think of clothes as disposable and to renew their wardrobe every season (Joung 688–689). The problem with this way of thinking is that the more people buy, the more they throw out. As a result, huge amounts of clothing are going directly into landfills, and because most clothes today are made with synthetic, petroleum-based fibers that are not biodegradable, these garments will remain in the landfills for decades (Claudio 449). The result of these environmentally destructive production techniques and non-durable, non-biodegradable products is that both ends of the fast-fashion industry cause irreparable harm to the environment.

V. Conclusion

Over the past thirty years, the boundaries of the fashion industry have expanded in radical new directions. Moving from the haute couture fashion houses of the 19th century to the consumer-focused fast fashion of today, the industry as a whole has undergone a massive shift in both production and consumption. While haute couture focused on high-quality, artfully designed pieces intended for the wealthiest members of society, fast fashion uses the quick, low-cost methods made available by globalization to sell large amounts of cheap clothing to all classes of people across the Western world. Fast fashion is about optimizing the supply chain in order to design clothing quicker and to allow a wider range of consumers to buy current clothing styles at lower prices. The issue with this model is that in order to produce so much clothing so quickly and so cheaply, unique designs need to be replaced with low-effort copies, skilled labour must be substituted with poorly managed sweatshops, and fine materials have to be discarded for their environmentally damaging counterparts that wear out in time for the next trend. Not only is fast fashion damaging in its own right, but it also forces higher-quality brands to adopt similar techniques just to compete. The relationship between fashion and globalization is complex. On one hand, globalization allows fashion retailers to reduce their production costs and be more competitive in a global economy while providing clothes for people of all classes. On the other hand, globalization in the fashion industry has also created tremendous ethical and environmental problems. This entire industry, which is so key to people's daily lives, is balanced on a pinhead, and for better or worse it is clear in which direction the momentum is going.

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